

ESL Writing: Past, Present, and Future

Tony Silva, Ph. D.

Purdue University, USA

I would like to begin by telling you about the educational context that I work in because I think it tells you a lot about me and my thinking. I am a faculty member in the English Department at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana in the USA. Purdue is a large full service state university with more than 35,000 students, about 10 percent of whom are ESL students. At Purdue I direct the ESL writing program, teach writing courses for graduate and undergraduate international students, and teach graduate courses for MA and Ph.D. students planning to become ESL teachers and scholars.

I work exclusively in a North American second language situation with adult students who are quite proficient in English; this is the context I will address here--because it is the only one I feel qualified to write about. I recognize that the readers of this journal may work in very different contexts with very different students. So I hope that what I have to say will be to some extent interesting and useful.

I would like to begin by giving you my account of where ESL language writing scholarship and teaching has been, where I think it is now, and where I hope it will go in the future.

It seems clear to me that developments in ESL composition have been influenced by and have often run parallel to developments in the teaching of writing to native speakers of English in the USA. However, the unique context of ESL

composition has required distinct perspectives, models, and practices.

The history of ESL writing since about 1945—which I see as the beginning of the modern era of second language teaching in the USA--can be viewed as a succession of approaches to ESL writing, a cycle in which particular approaches gain dominance and then fade, but never really disappear. My discussion will focus on the origins, principles, methods, and implications of what I see as the four most influential approaches of this period: controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and English for academic purposes.

From the late forties until the early sixties, ESL writing was addressed in a rather ad-hoc fashion. Article titles from this period, like "Freshman English for Foreigners" (Rogers, 1945), "College English for foreign students" (Gibian, 1951), and "Help for the foreign student" (Ives, 1953), reflect, in my view, the perceived newness of the notion of teaching second language writing, with each practitioner a lone voice crying out in the wilderness. What was being published during this period were basically reports of what teachers had done and how they had done it. It was not until the early to mid sixties that coherent approaches to instruction were constructed. The first of these was called controlled composition.

Controlled composition has its roots in Charles Fries' oral approach, the precursor of the audiolingual method of second

language teaching. Beneath controlled composition are the notions that language is speech (from structuralist linguistics) and that learning is habit formation (from behaviorist psychology). Given these basic notions, it is not surprising that, from this perspective, writing was regarded as a secondary concern, as reinforcement of oral habits. Accordingly, in his classic book, "Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language", Fries addressed writing as an afterthought, stating that "even *written* exercises might be part of the work" (1945, p.8, my italics) of the second language learner.

Some, like Edward Erasmus (1960) and Eugene Briere (1966), believed that these written exercises should take the form of "free composition"--that is, having students choose their own topics and write as much as they can without worrying too much about formal matters. Free composition was meant to enhance students' control of the language and to promote fluency in writing. However, such free composition was soundly rejected by others, like Anita Pincas (1962) who believed it to be a "naive, traditional view...in direct opposition to the expressed ideals of scientific, habit forming teaching methods." (p.185). She developed this point by explaining that "the reverence for original creativeness dies hard. People find it difficult to accept the fact that the use of language is the manipulation of fixed patterns; that these patterns are learned by imitation; and that not until they have been learned can originality occur in the manipulation of patterns or in the choice of variables within the patterns" (p.186).

Pincas seemed to echo the opinion of the majority which (1) focused almost exclusively on formal accuracy and correctness; (2) employed rigidly controlled

programs of systematic habit formation; (3) positively reinforced appropriate second language behavior; and (4) tried to avoid error at all cost--lest these errors become fossilized. The approach preferred practice with previously learned discrete units of language to talk of original ideas, organization, and style, and its methodology, involved the imitation and manipulation of model passages carefully constructed and graded for vocabulary and sentence patterns.

The exercises in Christina Bratt Paulston & Gerald Dykstra's textbook, *Controlled composition in English as a Second Language* (1973) are generally representative of activities in the controlled composition classroom. In this text, the student is presented with a written passage and is asked to rewrite (actually copy) the passage, making changes in such things as gender (for example, from masculine to feminine), number (from singular to plural), tense (from present to past), or voice (from active to passive).

In essence, in the controlled composition model, according to Wilga Rivers (a widely read, influential language teaching methodologist at the time) writing functions as "the handmaid of the other skills" (listening, speaking, and reading), "which must not take precedence as a major skill to be developed" (1968, p. 241) and must be "considered as a service activity rather than as an end in itself" (p.258). Learning to write in a second language is seen as an exercise in habit formation. The writer is a manipulator of previously learned language structures; the reader is the ESL teacher in the role of editor or proof reader. The text becomes a collection of sentence patterns and vocabulary items--a linguistic artifact, a vehicle for language practice. The writing

context is the ESL writing classroom; there is negligible concern for audience or purpose.

All of this said, I think controlled composition can be useful for ESL students with lower levels of English proficiency, with a focus on what one does right rather than on errors, and with more authentic texts; it can be usefully employed with learners who are not yet ready to produce texts in English.

The mid sixties brought an increasing awareness of ESL students' needs with regard to producing extended written discourse. This awareness led to suggestions that there was more to writing than building grammatical sentences; that what was needed was a bridge between controlled and free writing. This vacuum was filled by the ESL version of current-traditional rhetoric.¹

The current-traditional approach combined the basic principles of the current-traditional paradigm from native-speaker composition instruction with Robert Kaplan's theory of contrastive rhetoric. The notion of contrastive rhetoric is an outgrowth of the work of Benjamin Whorf on linguistic relativity. The notion, simply put, is that one's language and culture strongly influence one's patterns of thought and that, consequently, these thought patterns affect one's writing, making writing in another language problematic.

Kaplan, defining rhetoric as "the method of organizing syntactic units into larger patterns" (1967, p.15), suggested that ESL writers "employ a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader" (1966, p. 4). Thus, because first language interference was seen as extending beyond the sentence

level, "more pattern drill...at the rhetorical level rather than at the syntactic level" (1967, p.15) was called for. It was necessary "to provide the student with a form within which he may operate" (1966, p. 20).

The concern of this approach was the logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms. Of primary interest was the paragraph, where attention was given not only to its elements (topic sentences, support sentences, concluding sentences, and transitions), but also to various options for its development (illustration, exemplification, comparison, contrast, partition, classification, definition, causal analysis, and so on). The other important focus was on essay development, actually an extrapolation of paragraph principles to larger stretches of discourse. Addressed here were larger structural entities (introduction, body, and conclusion) and organizational patterns (normally narration, description, exposition, and argumentation), with exposition typically seen as the pattern most appropriate for use by university level second language writers.

Classroom procedures associated with this view of writing instruction focus students' attention on form. At their simplest, they ask students to choose among alternative sentences within the context of a given paragraph or longer piece of discourse. Another variety involves reading and analyzing a model text and then applying the structural knowledge gained to a parallel piece of "original" writing. The most complex types ask students (already provided with a topic) to list and group relevant facts, to derive topic and supporting sentences from these facts, assemble an outline, and write their compositions from that outline.

In short, from the perspective of this version of current traditional rhetoric, writing is basically a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences and paragraphs into prescribed patterns. Learning to write, then, involves becoming skilled in identifying, internalizing, and constructing these patterns. The writer fills in a preexisting form with provided or self-generated content. The reader is easily confused and perhaps irritated by unfamiliar patterns of expression. The text is a collection of increasingly complex discourse structures (sentences, paragraphs, sections, etc), each embedded in the next largest form. The implicit context for writing is an academic one, with the instructor's judgement presumed to mirror that of the community of educated native speakers.

All of this said, the ESL version of contrastive rhetoric provided some very useful insights into the connection between culture, language, thought, and writing and a necessary focus on form beyond the sentence level.

A textbook that is representative of the ESL version of contrastive rhetoric is Robert Bander's, *American English rhetoric: A writing program in English as a second language, 2nd edition* (1978). Its table of contents (which lists units on the chronological paragraph, the spatial paragraph, the expository paragraph, and essays developed by examples, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, definition, and logical division) puts it squarely in the current traditional camp, and the following paragraph taken from chapter one, entitled, "The English paragraph," clearly shows Bander's debt to Kaplan and contrastive rhetoric.

Writing in a foreign language at first may

seem to be very like writing in your native language, but of course it isn't. . . ideas don't fit together in the same way from language to language. A Russian, an Egyptian, a Brazilian, and a Japanese tend to arrange their ideas on the same subject in quite different ways within a paragraph. These differences exist because each culture has its own special way of thinking. And how a person thinks largely determines how he writes. Thus, in order to write well in English, a foreign student should first understand how English speakers usually arrange their ideas. This arrangement of ideas can be called a thought pattern. And even though English thought patterns are not native to you, once you understand them you can more easily imitate them. By doing this, you will succeed in writing more effective English. (p.3)

The introduction of the process approach to ESL composition seems to have been motivated by dissatisfaction with controlled composition and the current traditional approach. It was suggested that neither approach adequately fostered thought or its expression--that controlled composition was largely irrelevant to this goal and that the linearity and prescriptivism of current traditional rhetoric discouraged creative thinking and writing. Those who, like Barry Taylor (1981), felt that "writing is not the straightforward plan--outline--write process that many believe it to be" (pp-5-6), looked to first language composing process research for new ideas, assuming with Vivian Zamel (1982) that "ESL writers who are ready to compose and express their ideas use strategies similar to those of native speakers of English" (p. 203).

The composing process was seen as a "non-linear exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to

approximate meaning" (Zamel 1983, p.165). Guidance through and intervention in the process were seen as preferable to control--that is, the early and perhaps premature imposition of organizational patterns or syntactic or lexical constraints. Content, ideas, and the need to communicate would determine form. In essence, "composing means expressing ideas, conveying meaning. Composing means thinking" (Raimes 1983, p.261).

In the classroom context, this approach calls for providing a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment within which students, with ample time and minimal interference, can work through their composing processes. The teacher's role is to help students develop strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing, and planning structure and procedure), drafting (encouraging multiple drafts), revising (adding, deleting, modifying, and rearranging ideas); and editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics).

From a perspective process then, writing is a complex, recursive, and creative process that is very similar in its broad outlines for first and second language writers. Learning to write entails developing an efficient and effective composing process. The writer is the center of attention--someone engaged in the discovery and expression of meaning; the reader, focusing on content, ideas, and the negotiation of meaning, is not preoccupied with form. The text is a product--a secondary, derivative concern, whose form is a function of its content and purpose. Finally, there is no particular context for writing implicit in this approach; it is the responsibility of individual writers to identify and appropriately address the particular task,

situation, discourse community, and sociocultural setting in which they are involved.

A good example of a textbook that reflects an ESL version of a process centered approach is the first edition of Ann Raimes' (1987) book, entitled, *Exploring through writing: A process approach to ESL composition*, whose first four sections (getting started, finding ways in, writing and rewriting, and editing) address writing processes at length and in detail.

I think it is important to note here that (1) those in the ESL process camp seemed to feel that writing in a second language is pretty much the same as writing in one's native language--a view that I believe is not shared by the majority of ESL composition professionals, (2) that the ESL version of the process approach had a strong focus on personal writing, something, which again, I feel the majority of ESL writing professionals would not embrace, and (3) that resistance was inevitable given that many ESL composition professionals, coming from an applied linguistics orientation, were not about to acquiesce to a view, that, in their estimation, downplayed the linguistic aspects of writing.

Although the process approach was generally well and widely received in ESL composition, it was not without its critics. These critics perceived theoretical and practical problems and omissions of the approach and suggested that the focus of ESL composition instruction be shifted from the writer to the reader--that is, to the academic discourse community.

Most of the criticism of the process approach came from proponents of an English for academic purposes (EAP)

orientation. One major part of this criticism is the claim that the process approach did not adequately address some central issues in ESL writing. Joy Reid (1984a,b) suggested that the approach neglected to seriously consider variations in writing processes due to differences in (1) individual writing tasks and situations, (2) in the development of schemata for academic discourse, (3) in language proficiency, (4) in level of cognitive development, and (5) with regard to insights from the study of contrastive rhetoric.

Critics also questioned whether the process approach prepared students for academic work. According to Daniel Horowitz (1986a), the approach "creates a classroom situation that bears little resemblance to the situation in which [students' writing] will eventually be exercised" (p. 144). He went on to suggest that a process orientation ignores certain types of important academic writing tasks (particularly essay exams) and that what he saw as two basic tenets of the process approach--"content determines form" and "good writing is involved writing"-- did not apply in many academic contexts. Horowitz further claimed that a process oriented approach "gives students a false impression of how university writing will be evaluated" (p. 143). In essence, he asserted that the process approach overemphasized the individual's psychological functioning and neglected the sociocultural context, that is, the "realities of academia" -- that, in effect, the process approach operated in a sociocultural vacuum.

The alternative proposed involved a primary focus on academic discourse genres and the range and nature of academic writing tasks, aimed at helping to socialize the student into the academic

context and thus "ensure that student writing falls within...[the] range... of acceptable writing behaviors dictated by the academic community" (Horowitz, 1986b, p. 789).

The suggested instructional methodology aimed at simulating the conditions under which actual university writing tasks are done, and it involved (1) the close examination and analysis of academic discourse genres and writing task specifications; (2) the selection and intensive study of source materials appropriate for a given topic, question, or issue; (3) the evaluation, screening, synthesis, and organization of relevant data from these sources; and (4) the presentation of this data in acceptable academic English form.

In brief, from an English for academic purposes orientation, writing is the production of prose that will be acceptable at an English medium institution of higher education, and learning to write is part of becoming socialized to the academic community--finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it. The writer is pragmatic and oriented primarily toward academic success, meeting standards and requirements. The reader is a seasoned member of the hosting academic community who has well developed schemata for academic discourse and clear and stable views of what is and is not appropriate. The text is a more or less conventional response to a particular task type that falls into a recognizable genre. The context is, of course, the academic community and the typical tasks associated with it.

A good illustration of an EAP based writing textbook for ESL writers is John Swales and Christine Feak's (1994)

textbook, entitled, *Academic writing for graduate students: A course for nonnative speakers of English*, a textbook that is specifically designed to help nonnative graduate students improve their academic writing in English” with a “genre-based approach that allows for detailed attention to the purposes, structures, and styles of particular kinds of texts” (back cover).

So how influential are these approaches at this time, at least in North America? While I do not believe that controlled composition is being used in many college level ESL writing courses, I think the ESL version of current traditional rhetoric is still very much alive and perhaps the dominant approach in ESL writing classes. The composing process (variously defined) has pretty much become a standard part of ESL writing instruction—even in EAP oriented courses. And EAP itself has seemed to split into two camps: one focusing more and more on genre; another moving toward a more critical, and explicitly ideological stance. To sum up, one could paint a negative picture of developments in ESL writing, an unflattering portrait of a field unreflectively jumping from one approach to another in search of an ideal configuration. But I prefer to cast this history in a more positive light, with effective elements of earlier approaches being incorporated into later ones, and with this incorporation facilitating an accumulation of useful principles and practices and an increase in breadth and depth of knowledge in the field.²

I would now like to move on to a brief description of the current status of second language writing in terms of theory, research, and practice. I think one could accurately characterize ESL writing as being in a postmethod condition. That is, I

believe that most ESL writing professionals have moved away from a search for the ideal approach to writing and have moved toward a situation where, informed by theory—theory which is grounded in empirical research and personal experience—they develop their own instructional approaches on the basis of their perceptions of the particular needs of their students and the resources made available by their institutions.

The field, in my view, is moving toward appropriate and adequate theories of second language writing which (1) regard writing as a constructive and interactive activity; (2) are reasonably comprehensive and internally consistent; (3) reflect an understanding of historical developments in the field; (4) are informed by current work in relevant disciplines; and (5) are sensitive to the cultural, linguistic, and experiential differences of individuals and societies.

With regard to research, I believe that, at this point in time, it is focusing less on whether this or that approach or method or technique is better or worse and more on basic research, research on what I see as the central issue in second language composition: the difference between first and second language writing. If there is no difference or if the difference is negligible, inquiry into the nature of second language writing is pointless. An understanding of first language writing would suffice.

But, in my view, the results of existing comparative research show that there are, indeed, salient and important differences between first and second language writing. Here are some tentative generalizations based on research comparing the writing of ESL students and their native English speaking peers or the first and second

language writing of ESL students.

In general, L2 writing is typically simpler and less effective than L1 writing. No big surprise here.

The composing processes of L2 writers seem constrained in some salient ways. In comparison with L1 writers, they plan less, write with more difficulty, and exhibit less ability to revise in an intuitive manner, that is, on the basis of what "sounds" right.

At the discourse level, their texts are often shorter and contain more errors than L1 writing. Their texts frequently exhibit distinct patterns of organization, difficulty in orienting readers, and less facility in their use of cohesive devices.

In terms of lower level linguistic concerns, L2 writers' texts typically exhibit a simpler style of writing than L1 writers. L2 writers' sentences often include more coordination, less subordination, and less noun modification. L2 writers usually use shorter words and less specific words, and generally manifest less lexical variety and sophistication.³

As you can see, the generalizations one can make on the difference between L1 and L2 writing are few and quite limited. Therefore, I feel more basic research in this area is needed to develop a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of second language writing.

To address instructional issues, I would like to briefly describe an ESL writing course that, in my view, incorporates some of the recent advances in theory and research. The course, entitled, *English 101I: First year composition for international students*, is taught regularly at Purdue University. It's based on Ilona Leki's (1991) notion of building

expertise through sequenced writing assignments, that is having students write on one topic (of their choice) all semester, exploring it in a variety of ways. The assumption is that by focusing on one topic that they care about, students will develop a knowledge base (and the language to convey this knowledge) that will help them write papers with more depth, insight, and authority. For this course, students write five papers. In the first, they write what they know about their topic and about their personal involvement with it. An example: A Chinese student chose to write about autism because her younger brother was autistic. In paper two students find three related pieces of publicly available texts, summarize each text, and synthesize them in an essay format. For the third paper, the students are asked to develop and administer a survey which addresses their topic and to write up a report of the results. For the fourth paper, the students interview an expert on their subject. They develop questions beforehand and write up their results after. Finally, students are asked to pull everything they have learned about their topic during the semester into a final report, which usually takes the form of a persuasive essay with documentation.

The procedure followed for each of the papers is fairly similar. First there is presentation and discussion of the assignment and some formal planning. After this, the first draft comes in, and students get response from their peers and the teacher on the content and organization of their paper in progress. After the second draft comes in, students, again, get teacher and peer comments, but this time on grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. After this, the students revise and hand in their third and final draft, and three or four students are asked to read their papers to the class. The final draft is

then graded, using an analytic scale which addresses content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics.

I would like to move now from the current situation to some thoughts on the future of second language writing. I see a future in which the need for second language written communication will continue to increase rapidly. Some of the factors fueling this growth include (1) economic globalization; (2) advances in technology (for example, faxes, e-mail, and the world wide web); (3) increased opportunities for international exchange involving people, things, and ideas; and (4) the dominance of English as an international language.

So what needs to be done? Well, in addition to upgrading theory, research, and instruction in second language writing, I believe there is an urgent need to broaden the scope of the field, to move it beyond North America and beyond English. I would like to talk here about how the scope of second language writing studies might be expanded. I will focus primarily on institutional and material issues.

First, I would like to address some of the obstacles to such an expansion. For me, it comes down to money and language. Current research on second language writing is done primarily in affluent places, where financial resources are available to conduct and disseminate the results of this research. The upside of this situation is that scholars from these places have generated a great deal of published research; the downside is that the cost of accessing this research is very high. Even in affluent places, journal and book prices are pretty steep; in most other places; they are simply prohibitive.

Current research is published primarily in

English due to English's predominance in academia throughout the world. The upside of this situation is that as the use of English spreads, so does the research. The downside is that second language writing research published in other languages is becoming virtually invisible and that non-English publications on second language writing have become an endangered species.

So if you live in a less-affluent place and/or write in a language other than English, it's very likely that you won't be able to access or contribute to current scholarship in second language writing. This situation has no upside; the downside is that current thinking in second language writing is very narrow and does not reflect what's going on in most of the world.

Second, I'd like to make some suggestions about what can be done regarding this state of affairs and about who might do it. I see roles here for professional organizations, publishers, editors, and scholars.

Professional organizations (at least those who claim to be international: TESOL, for example) can strongly encourage and support international participation, especially for scholars from less affluent places. They can encourage publication of second language writing research done by scholars in less affluent places in their institutional books and journals. Professional organizations can reduce prices of membership and conference registration where prohibitive. Finally, they can hold conferences outside of more affluent places on occasion even if this means not turning a profit or even losing some money.

One possible direction to go is toward

smaller, more specialized meetings. In September of 1998, my colleague Paul Matsuda and I hosted a symposium on second language writing at Purdue. Because of the graciousness and generosity of our sixteen internationally known speakers—we were able neither to pay honoraria nor reimburse them for their travel expenses—we were able to keep costs relatively low for the participants. While we realize that the symposium will still be out of reach for many, we see it as a viable alternative, both in terms of quality and cost with, say, the annual TESOL convention.

Publishers can consider more than the bottom line; that is, be good corporate citizens in the global context. They can adopt a long term, rather than a short term, view with regard to potential markets. They can publish scholarship on second language writing in languages other than English—or *at least* publish abstracts in other languages. Publishers can lower shipping and handling charges for publications sent from more affluent to less affluent places. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for publishers to charge exorbitant amounts of money for shipping and handling. They can provide free or reduced price copies of journals and books to places where prices are prohibitive. And, perhaps most promising, they can distribute second language writing scholarship online at reasonable prices

Book series and journal editors can further internationalize their editorial boards. Editors can be proactive and encourage proposals and manuscripts from scholars from less affluent places. They can be willing to work in a substantial and meaningful way with scholars from less affluent places to develop publications. They can work to ameliorate problems caused by what Suresh Canagarajah, a

scholar from Sri Lanka (1996) calls “non-discursive publishing conventions”, which often work against scholars from non-affluent places with regard to publishing in mainstream journals and books: These include inflexible manuscript preparation conventions and unrealistic expectations about the availability of technology and materials like computers, photocopiers, diskettes, faxes, and paper.

Scholars from more affluent places can adopt a more global and inclusive view of second language writing and writing instruction and thus acknowledge the imbalance of opportunity in more and less affluent areas. They can help to make relevant databases or interlibrary loan arrangements more accessible to scholars from less affluent places. They can collaborate and share resources with these scholars. They can arrange scholar exchange opportunities by, for example, sponsoring visiting scholars from less affluent places. And they can attend professional meetings outside of the same old venues.

I recognize that even these fairly modest objectives will be difficult to meet and that progress will be slow at best. But I think second language writing specialists need to move, and fairly quickly, in this direction—not only for the sake of scholars in less affluent places, but for themselves; that is, it is in their best interest to globalize in order to develop more valid and realistic theories, research agendas, and instructional practices in the area of second language writing studies.⁴

NOTES

1. I am using Richard Young's definition of current traditional rhetoric here. He states that its features include "the emphasis on the composed product rather than the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition and argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis); the preoccupation with the informal essay and the research paper; and so on" (1978, p. 31).

2. Much of the foregoing information on the modern history of ESL writing comes from my chapter, "Second language composition instruction: Developments, issues, and directions in ESL" in a 1990 collection entitled, *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom*, edited by Barbara Kroll.

3. For more information on this research, I refer the reader to my 1993 *TESOL Quarterly* article, "Toward an understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing: The ESL research and its implications."

4. For more information on the Symposium on Second Language Writing, the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, and other resources, please check out my website at <http://icdweb.cc.purdue.edu/~silvat/>.

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